

Amazing what a spur to action is the threat of a visit from the health inspector – threat or opportunity? A false opposition for it's both. Deadlines have their uses after all. We've managed to defer this one for the time being but what a hive of activity there was before we knew we could do that: cupboards cleaned, oven overhauled, shelves washed down. There's still a lot to do but now we have hope; it's an opportunity to grasp and be thankful for. Every nation, every people, every individual needs this spur to action from time to time, if not daily, for unlike Christ we are not without sin. We call ourselves Christians not because we are yet fully remade in his likeness and image, but because this is our hope: we are a work in process. To think we are complete, that, as children of Christ we can already claim perfection, is a presumption – the kitchen may look clean until a closer inspection reveals otherwise, all those nooks and crannies which remain overlooked until we move things around. It's the inspector's job to find them but not to condemn out of hand. Indeed though they could inspect without warning they usually give us time to prepare. And so to Advent and John the Baptist not seeking to condemn out of hand but to give God's people a chance to realise their true dignity, their true nature as children of God, but some will need to be challenged more than others, to be shocked out of their indifference, their presumption that all is well with themselves and God. And the test is their relationship with others: the appropriate fruit their concern not for their own well-being but for the well-being of those they have responsibility for. We keep the kitchen clean after all not for our own sakes but because we offer a service to others and find that when we attend to their needs we also attend to our own. This is the key to the kingdom – in our service of others we find salvation for ourselves. John the Baptist of course is taking a great risk in this regard for his challenge to those who are self-serving could go either way -it may indeed lead to a conversion of heart or confirm the scribes and Pharisees in their contempt for God's people, so confirmed in their role and enamoured of the power it gives them, that they fail to see it as a service given to them on trust for the benefit of all. This of course remains a great danger for anyone who holds power over others. A priest has to continually remind himself that he is not here for himself only. The same of course is true for all monastic superiors. And it needs grace if it is to be done at all, that is with joy rather than a dull obedience. What John the Baptist is offering is an opportunity for us to do our part: to clean the shelves, wash down the walls, scrub out the oven, but it's only Christ who can fill the vacuum left with joy, with the fire and grace of the Holy Spirit. We are not judged by our past sins but by our willingness to let go of them and in the joy we find in serving others. If that is there, even in the smallest way, then something is there not of our own making – the Spirit at work already. So it's a time to put our own house in order for the sake of others; if the kitchen is clean and the food is safe we can welcome others as Christ welcomes us or, as St Teresa of Avila says

*“God is to be found among the pots and pans.”*

And as Christ might say, in the meal we then share with one another.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour